

Koolhaas HouseLife
Pomerol, Herzog & de Meuron
Xmas Meier
Gehry's Vertigo

Living Architectures

Architecture documentaries by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine

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| <p>This film portrays one of the masterpieces of contemporary architecture of recent years: the house in Bordeaux designed by Rem Koolhaas / OMA in 1998.</p> <p>Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine let the viewer enter into the house's daily intimacy through the stories and chores of Guadalupe Acedo, the home's caretaker and housekeeper, and the other people who look after the building, following and interacting with Guadalupe, blooms an unusual and unpredictable look at the spaces and structure of the building.</p> <p>Year: 2008 Length: 21'00"</p> <p>Language: French with subtitles</p> | <p>The film takes us to the party atmosphere of mealtimes among the grape-pickers in the dining hall designed by Herzog & de Meuron (France) for the prestigious Jean-Pierre Moueix vineyards.</p> <p>In order to admire the distinctive features and traits of this building the film is set during the crucial phase in its lifecycle, harvest time. The film offers an unusual visit, observing the grape-pickers' daily activities and joining them at the mealtimes and celebrations marking the long days of this period of hard work.</p> <p>Length: 25'33" Year: 2010 Language: French with subtitles</p> | <p>Xmas Meier</p> <p>Xmas Meier explores the impact of contemporary architecture on people's daily lives, and describes how the new church designed by Richard Meier in 2003 has transformed the life of the Tor Tre Teste neighbourhood in Rome, lifting it from anonymity to international renown.</p> <p>Residents from the neighbourhood, filmed over the Christmas period, talk about how this new architectural icon affects their lives. A multiple and contrasted portrait of the new identity of this district.</p> <p>Year: 2010 Length: 22'02"</p> <p>Language: Italian with subtitles</p> | <p>Gehry's Vertigo</p> <p>The film Gehry's Vertigo offers to the spectator a rare and vertiginous trip across the rooftops of the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao. Through the portrait of the climbing team in charge of cleaning the glass - their ascensions, their techniques and their difficulties - this film observes the complexity and virtuosity of Frank Gehry's architecture.</p> <p>Length: 22'56" Year: 2010 Language: Spanish with subtitles</p> |
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Politics of the Gaze: The Films of Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine

Fabrizio Gallanti

The novel “The Aesthetics of Resistance” by Peter Weiss opens with a long scene of almost 50 pages, set in Berlin of 1937 at the height of the Nazi regime where three young communist workers, Heilman, Coppi and the unnamed narrator, stop to dwell upon the Pergamon Altar preserved in the Pergamon Museum. There are some secondary characters in the margins of the mythological scenes that lead the three visitors into a discussion about the enormous amount of human energy of the slaves and the workers used to make the frieze and the sculptures, and on the traces of their work on the stone of the monument dedicated to the celebration of the glories of the aristocracy, which the faces of some of the figures in marble probably represent. Having returned home, they continue talking about the role of art, especially with respect to class struggle and the proletarian conditions which excluded them from the appreciation of so-called “high” culture, raised as they were within an educational system for the children of workers that trains them to follow in their parents’ footsteps, thereby making them victims of the process of realization of capital gains under industrial German capitalism between the two wars. Heilmann is an apprentice at Siemens, Coppi is a 15-year-old high school student and the narrator is a factory worker. In a couple of days, the main character is about to leave for Spain in order to enrol in the International Brigade and fight against the pro-Franco forces.

During their conversation, references are made to the pictorial art of Delacroix, Millet and Gericault: the three young proletarians’ interest in these painters lies in the choice of subjects in the artists’ paintings, which, for the first time in the course of Oc cidental art, use workers as central subjects in art. Having returned to his house, the youthful Coppi talks to his father, a textiles worker exhausted by his many long years of work, about the painting “The Iron Rolling Mill ” by Adolph Menzel in 1875. The painting does not show a romantic or sentimental view of the factory, nor is it yet another version of the cave of Cyclops, but rather, it communicates the fatigue and repetitive strain of exploited workers of the great iron works.

The transformation of subjects of interest by realistic 18th century painting anticipates an increasing trend of a political role being assumed for aesthetic practices, a tendency which Peter Weiss adheres to as a writer and intellectual.

There has always been a crucial problem of communication and diffusion of knowledge regarding architecture. Each type of representation and description (text, drawings, photographs, videos, digital simulations), refers back to an experience that is absent, that is to say, the concrete experience of the buildings, which have been replaced by expressive surrogates that therefore constitute parallel and complementary discourses to the subjects being alluded to. This gap between reality and representation is a space of experimentation and of never-ending aesthetic manipulation: it is made up of anticipations of: spatial configurations still to come (where drawing and images foreshadow the future); segmentation and replacement of willingly contrived images in order to summon up a certain kind of effect for a building or a space; overlapping among creators of works and artists of representation, in such a way that certain contents are communicated while others are not (the architect imposing on the photographer a series of privileged points of view of his own constructions, while leaving out others, is an almost caricatured stereotype now); construction of apparatuses of perception that lead to a deeper appreciation of what is possible in reality (the synoptic view of a model or a sectional drawing offers a complete type of understanding much superior to the movement through a building or over a territory); and movement simulations and the use of space through devices that operate by analogy to the human gaze (video and film) or by similitude to other types of gazes (digital simulation through

projects, recalling the flights of virtual birds equipped with a movie camera).

The films of Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine posit a political position of the gaze, which acts in a similar way to that of the role of art declared by Peter Weiss in “The Aesthetics of Resistance”.

The films are part of the free space that the representation of architecture still provides, in order to carry out this role of art, thereby making it contemporary to our times.

The titles of their films, and therefore apparently the main subjects of their work, refer to famous architects: Rem Koolhaas, Richard Meier, Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano and Herzog & de Meuron. But the titles allude to these people to introduce an alien element that coincides with the narrative slippage that characterizes their filmography. “Koolhaas Houselife”, “Xmas Meier”, “Pomerol Herzog & de Meuron” and “Inside Piano” use certain buildings by these architects as a pretext to carry out an exploration of the modern world of labour, by placing subjects before the camera, in this case the workers and users of these spaces, who, by convention, have been excluded from the representation of architecture, at least in its most consecrated and conventional forms. Guadalupe Acedo, the cleaning woman in the house in Bordeaux by Rem Koolhaas, the seasonal workers who carry out the Merlot harvest on behalf of the Moueix family in Pomerol, and who make use the refectory by Herzog & de Meuron, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Tor Tre Teste in Rome where the church by Richard Meier is located, the swarm of specialized workers and technicians that guarantee the Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry in Bilbao is maintained daily and for the long-term, are the anonymous heroes of a fragmentary fresco of modern economic, social and political dynamics, which often remain invisible, and where the space is the background of where these dynamics have been made to come out through the camera, to take on a true and proper poetic force, thanks to the acuity and proximity of the narration.

There is an image that has been making the rounds over the past few years and it reassumes the ethics that inform this research. Guadalupe Acedo appears in front of the lens, standing up, wearing her everyday work clothes, a brown apron. She does the cleaning and small maintenance works of the villa by OMA on the hills that overlook Bordeaux. To her left, there is a 16th century-like arrangement of the instruments of her job; buckets, brooms, brushes, a vacuum cleaner, a green plastic-coated canvas bag containing various detergents. We can see some bookshelves behind her. Those who know the project can discern that the space of this framing lies in the shaft of a piston-powered elevator, which also acts as a library. But the villa project remains secondary: Guadalupe looks at the camera, she is posing and participating actively in the composition of the image. Hers is a knowing and proud body not only in this frame but throughout the entire film, passing through the domestic interior to demonstrate that she knows all its secrets, without being servile to the social hierarchy that the house itself implies. The fact that the framing is the result of a tacit dialogue between subject (Guadalupe) and the film-makers Bêka and Lemoine, or that a pose exists that is taken up consciously, is similar to the political position taken up by contemporary photographers such as Patrick Faigenbaum and Marc Pataut, who reject the idea of the stolen instantaneous moment, so as to permit the subjects in the image to be active subjects and to keep control of the representation of themselves. This same type of knowledge of one’s own image, of pride of one’s class is the same of the Basque climbers, specialized in the cleaning of Gehry’s architecture, who put readily show the preparation of their work equipment, as if a knight were being dressed or the pride below the complex choreography that the harvest workers in Pomerol perform every year, in order to break up the monotony of their work in the vineyards.

This active role is also a consequence of the type of proximity that the camera builds together with its subjects: the movement of the images suggests an intimacy of the gaze, due to their intense, but non-aggressive frequentation. The camera fluidly follows

movements through the various spaces of the scenes of many activities (even the liturgy in the church at Tor Tre Teste). The films are edited into brief chapters, normally ten five-minute stories, which reconstruct the periods of shooting that last about a week each time. The film-makers enter into a dimension of intense exchange with their “actors”. The editing gives a dramatic structure, rhythm and a sense of narration as taken from a series of anodyne facts. In this sense, the films are similar to the works of artists such as Frederick Wiseman: incursions within institutions, from which a story is put together through editing and choosing of frames that highlight the social reality of the place. If Wiseman filmed hospitals (Hospital, 1970), high schools (High School I, 1968 and High School II, 1994) and juvenile courts (Juvenile Court, 1973), that is too say, various public institutions, Bêka and Lemoine focus their attention on the museum, the house, the cafeteria and the church, which are essentially private institutions, by unravelling the strings of the community that lives in and occupies these places. The profound nature of the economic structures of the contemporary world slowly comes out: it is no longer the violent oppression described by Weiss which unfolds in the industrial world, but a type of exploitation that is more subtle and apparently meek, but pervasive all the same, where all space has become a factory (the same intuition that Italian scholars of the working class such as Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri and the radical architects of Archizoom had at the end of the sixties) and where, however, workers develop spontaneous tactics of resistance, often linked to their capacity for invention and ability to work together (the small stratagems that Guadalupe employs to clean the house and avoid its slow wear and tear, the acrobatics of the cleaners in Bilbao, the strong sense of belonging of the precarious community of the harvest). Along with the more nuanced class differentiations that come out in less evident forms of violence, albeit still aggressive, as captured by the camera in their smallest details.

The architecture disappears and only a pretext remains so that this testimony gets communicated: the name of the famous architect attracts the attention of the public and critics much easier. The titles and locations chosen by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine feel like a “detournement”, a frown against the structures of power who have commissioned these architectural buildings, which, however, often carry out the real function of social mechanisms (the wonderful notion of architecture as a machine that puts bodies ideas, uses into movement, comes from the architect Sanford Kwinter, in Architectures of Time). The films reveal buildings that are the arena of certain, small non-ritualistic aspects, small flaws or qualities that are unexpected and sudden. They demonstrate a range of affective relationships and hope anyway, as with the Roman church, perceived by the inhabitants of the area also as a mechanism of social emancipation and progress (reminiscent perhaps of the housing estates in contrast to Pasolini’s suburbs of Mamma Roma, but the permanence of these hopes suggest that no real progress has been made). The buildings slip through the fingers of their designers, to take on an active role in the lives of those who use, maintain and live in these buildings, just as the factory had a crucial role, now experienced as frustration, or as nostalgia, in the lives of the workers. Some of the architects who were called upon to comment on these documentaries reflected still yet again on their work, ignoring the fact that the documentaries are not another in an endless series of hagiographic exercises, but only narrative pretexts: the same inability to foresee the life of their works after their completion seems to cloud their judgement with regards to what these places represent in reality.

The five names of the series are but archaeological remains and memorial stones that after many years will lose their relevance, placed as they are beyond life, which these films display with precise affection.

- Fabrizio Gallanti, architect and writer, currently working for Abitare magazine.

About Storefront
Since 1982 Storefront has presented the work of more than a thousand architects and artists who challenge conventional perceptions of space—from aesthetic experiments to explorations of the conceptual, social and political forces that shape the built environment. Storefront creates an open forum to help architects and artists realize work and present it to a diverse audience in a program that includes an exhibition, film, publication and conversation series. In 1993, Storefront commissioned a collaborative building project by artist Vito Ac concì and architect Steven Holl. The project replaced the existing facade with a series of twelve panels that pivot vertically or horizontally to open the entire length of the gallery directly onto the street. The project blurs the boundary between interior and exterior and, by placing the panels in different configurations, creates a multitude of different possible facades. Now regarded as a contemporary architectural landmark, Storefront’s facade is visited by artists, architects and students from around the world.

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Storefront for Art
and Architecture

Gallery hours
Tuesday-Saturday 11am-6pm
Closed Sunday and Monday

Gallery location
The gallery is located at **97 Kenmare Street**, between Mulberry and Lafayette Streets.
Trains: 6 to Spring; N/R to Prince; B/D/F/V to Broadway Lafayette

Storefront’s programs are made possible with support from the New York State Council for the Arts, a state agency, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Citizens for NYC, the Stephen A. and Diana L. Goldberg Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, LMCC, the Lily Auchincloss Foundation and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. Support is also provided by Storefront’s Board of Directors, members and individuals.

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